

CHAPTER VIII

THE GREEN LIZARD, *LACERTA VIRIDIS*

DISTRIBUTION—DESCRIPTION—HAUNTS—HABITS—
FOOD—REPRODUCTION.

Distribution.—A further word of explanation is necessary to account for this species being introduced into a book which purports to deal only with British lizards. It is not at all a question of the evidence concerning the capture of this or that specimen in this or that locality, or the further argument thereupon as to whether these captured green lizards are to be regarded as indigenous. As far as England is concerned, *Lacerta viridis* is not, and never has been, an indigenous species, and the capture of a few specimens under circumstances which seem to point to their being so, merely indicates that out of the very large number that are kept by dealers and as vivarium pets, some few every now and then manage to make their escape from captivity. The same thing has occurred with a tortoise, but it was not therefore seriously urged that land tortoises were to be regarded

as indigenous British reptiles. The real reason why the green lizard finds a place here is simply because according to the "County and Vice-County Divisions of the British Isles" (for biological purposes), the Channel Islands form one division; and as the green lizard and the wall lizard are both indigenous in those islands, it has been necessary for the sake of uniformity and accuracy to include both species in this book.¹

Distribution.—In Europe the distribution of the green lizard may be said to be mainly in the centre and southern portions of that continent. It is fairly common in France. I recently had a specimen of the asp (*Vipera aspis*) sent to me from the Gironde district which contained a full-grown green lizard in its gullet. It is also found in Italy, the south of Switzerland, Sicily, Greece, Poland, Austria, Barbary, and the Morea. It is not indigenous to England, Scotland, or Ireland, but is so in the Channel Isles. It is essentially an inhabitant of warm and temperate climates, and hence is found to be common in those areas washed by the Mediterranean.

The belief which many people in the south of England have, that the green lizard is truly indigenous, has been supported, or possibly originated, by a remark of Gilbert White's in the *Natural History of Selborne*.

¹ This sheet was issued by Alexander Somerville, B.Sc., F.L.S., after consultation with most of the leading naturalists in this country; in it the whole country is mapped out into divisions according to natural boundaries. It is most valuable to field naturalists in tracing out distribution.

It occurs in Letter XXII., and runs thus:—"It is a satisfaction to me to find that a green lizard has actually been procured for you in Devonshire; because it corroborates my discovery, which I made many years ago, of the same sort, on a sunny sandbank near Farnham, in Surrey. I am well acquainted with the south hams of Devonshire; and can suppose that district, from its southerly situation, to be a proper habitation for such animals in their best colours." There is not much in the paragraph to throw accurate light upon the source of this specimen; Pennant did not even take it himself, it was "procured" for him. The context, however, clearly shows that both White and Pennant understood the specimen to have been a wild specimen captured in the open. The association of the incident with White's own discovery at Farnham probably reveals the true nature of the lizard, since, as we have seen, Farnham is one of the localities frequented by the sand lizard (*L. agilis*). The green colour of the specimen was the feature that specially attracted the attention of both these observers, and that, as we have already noted, is a prominent characteristic of the males of the sand lizard species. Both the specimen procured for Pennant and that seen by White at Farnham were doubtless sand lizards. White's remark concerning the suitability of Devonshire for the requirements of *L. viridis* may be quite correct, but it is of no value, since it is a common occurrence in nature to find

the absence of species in places apparently well adapted for them. That White was not very familiar with the green lizard is evident from the first sentence of the very next letter (Letter XXIII.), where he says: "It is not improbable that the Guernsey lizard and our green lizard may be specifically the same; all that I know is, that, when some years ago many Guernsey lizards were turned loose in Pembroke College garden, in the University of Oxford, they lived a great while, and seemed to enjoy themselves very well, but never bred." Indeed, the naturalist of Selborne appears to have given very little attention to the local reptiles, if one may judge from the paucity of his references to them.

Then, of course, green lizards are not uncommonly found as escaped captives. I am not aware to what extent they were kept as vivarium pets in the days when Gilbert White wrote, but nowadays a very large number of people have vivaria with them in captivity, and like all lizards they are quick to take the opportunity of a door left open, so that the real wonder is that not more specimens are thus encountered. I know lizard lovers, too, who, desirous of introducing such a graceful and beautiful creature, have deliberately set free some specimens in their own locality, but I am not aware of any of these having been recaptured. The conclusion is absolutely certain, however, that *L. viridis* is not an indigenous lizard to the mainland of Great Britain, although in time, if

sufficient are introduced and set free, it may succeed in establishing itself in some counties. From the field naturalist's point of view such a consummation is devoutly to be wished, as it would make a handsome addition to our all too scanty reptile fauna.

Description.—The green lizard is considerably larger than any of the other lizards encountered in the British Isles, with the exception of the slow-worm, which indeed reaches as great a length, but is not nearly so bulky a creature. The average size of the adult may be put at 12 to 15 inches, though a good number of specimens exceed this measurement. The males, as in most other lizards, are larger than the females, very large males reaching a length of 16 or 17 inches. Here again, the observer must be careful to see whether the tail is intact before coming to a conclusion as to the total length, for the tail is responsible for the greater part of the total length, almost three-quarters of it in very long males.

The predominating colour, as the name implies, is green. This is particularly upon the upper surface, and therefore the colour most readily seen. It shades off into yellow on the belly, the intermediate part, or the lateral aspect, being greenish yellow.

Other colours are found in special parts of the body. If the specimen be a male in the breeding season, the throat will exhibit a bluish tinge. The prevailing green of the back will often be mottled with black specks, or yellow spots. Often, too, a decided brown



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colour will be noticed. As in other reptiles, *age* has an influence on the colouring. In this species it affects specially the stripes on the sides, which in the young ones are yellow. These disappear in the older males, but are persistent in some of the adult females.

There is a distinct semicircular collar on the neck. The eyelids are prominent, the head flattened, and the snout rather pointed. The post-nasal shields are generally two in number, one overlapping the other. The head shields are large, the scales on the back small, the ventral scales in longitudinal rows, the scales on the tail elongated and hexagonal, again arranged in annular fashion. The transition from the small body scales to the long hexagonal tail scales is abrupt, and the tail very gradually tapers to a very fine point. These characters can be made out in the illustrations, and the several species may be compared to show their respective prominence.

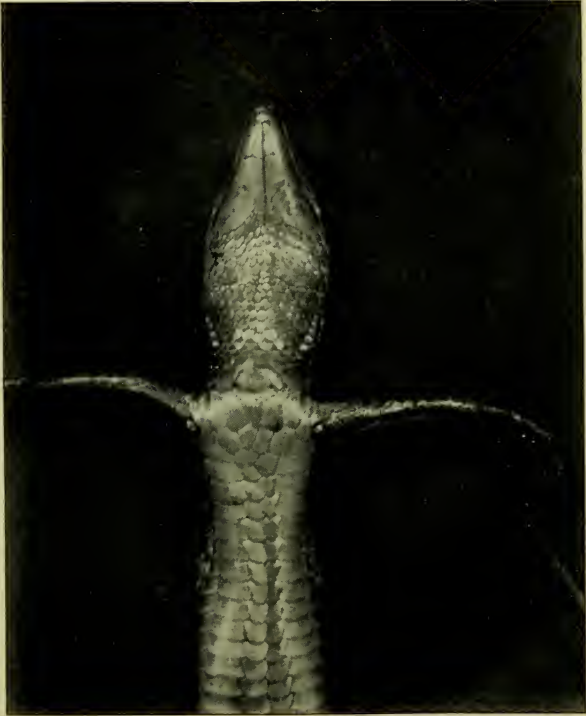
Haunts and Habits. — Since it is only in the Channel Islands that we have to deal with the green lizard as a British species, it will suffice to say that, as far as its haunts are concerned, it prefers rocky ground at a somewhat high altitude.

In its habits it is mainly terrestrial, but not exclusively so, as it has frequently been observed to climb trees, especially when endeavouring to elude a pursuer. Dr. Gadow states that in these circumstances, if hard pressed, the green lizard will take tremendous leaps down to the ground, curiously enough

without sustaining the fracture of the tail which under some other conditions occurs with great ease. This lizard is another example of a reptile which is anything but slow and sluggish in its movements; indeed, the very opposite is the truth, it is extremely quick and agile. In captivity it has been found by some to do badly, whilst others have found no difficulty in keeping it. It certainly does not seem to thrive after a year or so, possibly the artificial hibernation is not satisfactory. It soon becomes accustomed to its owner and free from all fear.

Food.—As usual insects of one kind or another are largely partaken of. Butterflies are said to be a favourite diet. Worms also, and, according to Dr. Gadow, snails, are eaten. In a specimen the author has from Gironde, the stomach was nearly full of a species of black beetle. The lizard itself was from the gullet of a smooth snake, so that the snake, the lizard, and the beetles, formed a striking object-lesson on the struggle for existence in nature. What the beetles contained in the way of food was not ascertained.

Reproduction.—After the green lizards emerge from the winter hibernation, the males fight amongst themselves a good deal previous to pairing with the females, which takes place in the spring months. After fertilisation, the eggs are partially developed in the female oviducts, where they are carried for four weeks. They are then deposited in situations suitable



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for further development with the aid of warmth, and the young are hatched out in another four weeks, so that the whole period of gestation is eight weeks. The young, or at any rate the eggs deposited, are usually from eight to ten in number. They have yellow lateral lines, which, as we saw, persist in some of the females in adult life. With regard to the question of the mother exercising any watch over the eggs, or giving any other sign of interest, Miss Hopley says: "Mr. Jenner Weir told me of one (a green lizard, that is) in his possession, who displayed not only vigilance and care for her eggs, but considerable wiliness in secreting them. The spot where she had laid them being discovered, she being there, hastily retreated, but presently returned and scratched the peat over them till hidden by a little mound; then continued day after day to visit the spot and bask on the mound; but, as if conscious of being watched, would never do anything to betray the place while anyone was near."¹ The whole question of parental relationship is a very interesting one in reptiles, as they seem to be on the border line of those vertebrates which give indications of its evolution. *A priori* one would expect to find it appearing first in those animals which brought forth their young alive, rather than in oviparous creatures such as the green lizard.

¹ C. Hopley, *British Reptiles*, p. 92.